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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF

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TAGS: PHUM SOCI PREL PGOV KIRF VM HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS UBCV PATRIARCH THICH HUYEN QUANG

REF: A) HCM 572; B) Hanoi 3187

1. (SBU) Summary: The Ambassador visited the Most Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, Patriarch of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), at Quy Nhon General Hospital November 21. Thich Huyen Quang confirmed that he remains under unofficial pagoda arrest, although local officials arranged his hospitalization. The 86-year-old monk expressed his gratitude for the ambassador's visit and sought USG support for the creation of a religious school for its monks. Unlike UBCV General Secretary Thich Quang Do, who sharply attacked the GVN in a November 21 meeting in HCMC (septel), the patriarch did not raise broader political issues with the Ambassador. In a separate meeting, Chairman of the Binh Dinh Provincial People's Committee told the Ambassador that Thich Huyen Quang "may request permission to travel as soon as he is healthy" and that he would allow it. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On November 21, the Ambassador met for 20 minutes with UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang in a VIP room at Quy Nhon General Hospital. The 86-year-old religious leader has been receiving treatment for a stomach hemorrhage; local GVN officials arranged for his hospitalization on November 18. Thich Huyen Quang was on an IV drip and remained in bed throughout the visit, but his voice was strong and he greeted the Ambassador with a firm handshake. Thich Huyen Quang stated that his health had improved considerably, and he expected to be released the next day. (Note: Currently, he remains in the hospital.) Although local officials accompanied the Ambassador to the hospital, the meeting was private except for two doctors and one nurse who remained in the room.

3. (SBU) Contradicting information circulating on the internet that local officials refused to provide medical treatment to him in the past, Thich Huyen Quang stated he had not made any previous requests for treatment, although he acknowledged that he had been ill for some time. When asked why he did not receive treatment earlier, he simply said he "didn't think of it." Thich Huyen Quang confirmed that prior to his hospitalization, he was not allowed to leave his pagoda, remaining under virtual house arrest since October 2003 when he was stopped from traveling to Ho Chi Minh City with other UBCV monks. He stated that it was "very difficult" for him to communicate with UBCV Deputy Head Thich Quang Do in Ho Chi Minh City who is also under unofficial pagoda arrest. He did not directly respond to the Ambassador's offer of USG assistance to try to facilitate the visit of his UBCV Deputy. On November 22, HCMC and Dong Nai province police forces prevented Thich Quang Do from visiting. (DAS Dugan's November 21 visit with UBCV General Secretary Thich Quang Do and Thich Quang Do's failed attempt to travel to visit his mentor will be reported septel.)

4. (SBU) In contrast to his statements to Ambassador Burghardt in April 2004 (Ref. A), Thich Huyen Quang said he saw "no reason" why the outlawed UBCV should merge with the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS). When asked what the Ambassador could do for him, Thich Huyen Quang emphasized the UBCV's need to establish a school to train its next generation of leaders from primary school through graduate studies.

Provincial Leadership Takes Conciliatory Tone

5. (SBU) In a subsequent meeting, Mr. Vu Hoang Ha, Chairman of the Binh Dinh Provincial People's Committee, told the Ambassador that Thich Huyen Quang "may request permission to travel as soon as he is healthy" and indicated that he would approve the request. Chairman Ha expressed his frustration with dealing with the UBCV and pointed out that he and other senior provincial officials had visited Thich Huyen Quang several times over the past year and had promptly transferred the UBCV leader to the hospital in response to his request. Ha noted that two officers of the Ministry of Public Security had donated blood when Quang was in need of a blood transfusion the previous week. He also claimed that his staff had been arranging for Thich Huyen Quang to travel to Hanoi "earlier this month," but those plans had to shelved due to the Patriarch's health problems.

6. (SBU) When asked by the Ambassador why an ill 86-year-old man was seen as a threat to the GVN, Chairman Ha said that the UBCV brought on their current problems with the GVN themselves by holding an "illegal Congress" in September 2003 (reftel). Ha stated that the UBCV could only hold such meetings if it was a registered religious group. The Ambassador pointed out the

difficulty in registering a religious group without first holding internal discussions about the issue. Ha replied that the GVN does not wish to be involved in the UBCV's deliberations on whether to unify with the VBS or seek to register as a separate religious organization, but offered no suggestions as to how its leaders could come to such a decision when they are not permitted to meet or even speak to each other.

17. (SBU) Comment: While we would like to think otherwise, Chairman Ha is not likely to be able to fulfill his promise of more lenient treatment for Thich Huyen Quang in the future. In October 2003, Thich Huyen Quang was allowed to leave Binh Dinh Province, only to be stopped in Khanh Hoa Province on his way to Ho Chi Minh City. Upon his return to Binh Dinh, Quang was placed under unofficial pagoda arrest. The GVN's decision to prevent Thich Quang Do from traveling from HCMC to visit his ailing mentor probably is a more accurate gauge of GVN attitudes towards the UBCV and reflects its intention to keep the UBCV on a very tight leash. End Comment.

WINNICK